

Westwood High School Academy Teams profile

November 2021

Approximately 900 ninth grade students at Westwood High School in Mesa, Arizona are distributed across six Academy Teams. Each core team consists of at least four educators: a lead teacher and three certified teachers. Depending on students' needs, special educators, English Language Learner educators, MLFTC residents and paraeducators may also be included on the team.

Introduction

Westwood High School piloted ninth grade Academy Teams in fall of 2018 in an effort to support students in the transition to high school. The pilot team saw a decrease in discipline referrals, students reported a stronger sense of belonging, and educators indicated that the flexible schedule they developed afforded them the opportunity to dive more deeply into their content areas. By fall of 2020, all ninth grade educators had adopted team-based models.

Teams of educators with distributed expertise

Role specialization on the core educator team

Each group of 150 ninth graders has a core team of between five and eight dedicated educators. All teams have a math teacher, ELA teacher, science teacher and a career technical education teacher, one of whom serves as the lead teacher for the team. These four educators are then joined by special educators, English Language Learner educators, MLFTC residents and paraeducators based on the needs of the students.

The largest core team, which includes eight educators, distributes expertise with the following role specializations:

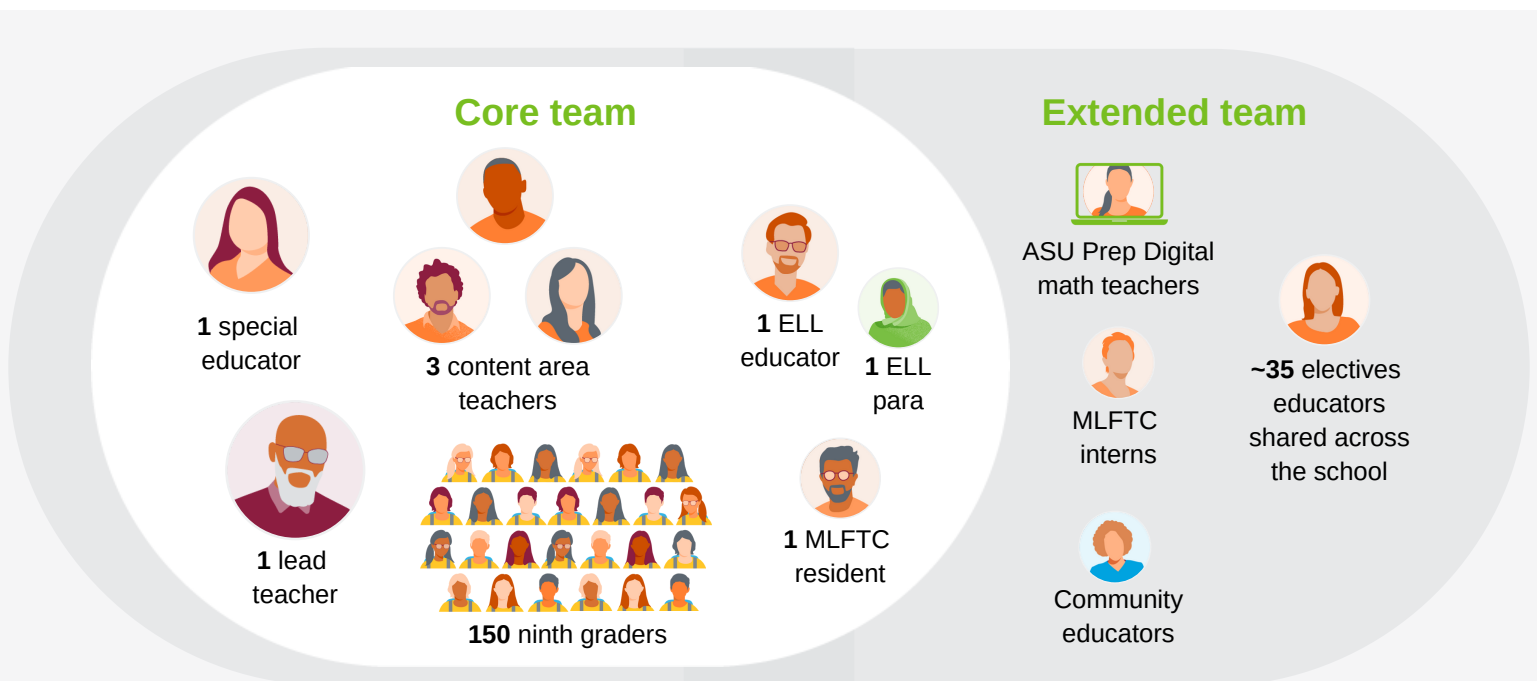
- **Lead teacher/biology teacher:** In addition to teaching students biology, this team's lead teacher streamlines communication between educators on the team and the school administration, and facilitates daily team meetings (e.g., cross-curricular planning, data conversations, intervention) during students' electives classes.
- **Math teacher:** All students on this team take Algebra I, offered by the math teacher. Additionally, the team's math teacher leads the team's effort to build a "living library:" A recurring time during which students interview community members to understand how mathematics impacts their careers and daily lives.
- **ELA teacher:** All students on this team take English 9, offered by the ELA teacher. The ELA teacher also serves as the mentor teacher for an MLFTC resident.
- **Career Technical Education teacher:** In ninth grade, students aim to identify a career-college interest in advance of choosing the CTE pathway they will pursue in 10th and 11th grades. The CTE teacher aims to connect students' learning to the real world and to prepare them to make their career-college interest choices.
- **Special educator:** The team's special educator co-plans with the other educators on the team, co-teaches and provides accommodations in a subset of math and science classes, and facilitates pull-out services as dictated by students' Individual Education Plans.
- **English Language Learner educator:** The ELL educator supports 27 students across four class periods and facilitates pull-out services during electives periods to deliver targeted instruction.

- **MLFTC resident:** For the first half of this school year, the team includes an MLFTC resident (a senior-year student engaged in rigorous, practice-embedded experience, teacher collaboration and family engagement) whose program area of focus is English.
- **ELL paraeducator:** The team's ELL paraeducator joins the ELA teacher and ELL teacher every morning and provides targeted support for small groups of English 9 students.

Members of the extended team

Students are supported not only by members of their core educator team but also by members of an extended team, which includes (but may not be limited to):

- **MLFTC interns:** MLFTC interns join some teams for one or two days per week.
- **Electives teachers:** About 35 electives teachers work with students across Grades 9–12, facilitating instruction in physical education, languages, band, video production and more. Students attend two electives periods each day.
- **ASU Prep Digital math teachers:** On some teams, ASU Prep Digital math teachers take the lead on monitoring student progress with the ALEKS adaptive learning program for mathematics.
- **Community educators:** Teams are actively working toward incorporating community educators into their planning and instruction. Most recently, a community educator visited with a math class to teach students how to play cribbage, a game which encourages fluency in mental math and skip counting.



Deeper and personalized learning

Westwood's Academy Teams educators deepen and personalize student learning in a number of ways, a selection of which are described below.

Cross-curricular instruction

During daily planning time, Academy Teams prioritize making cross-curricular connections between English, math, science and CTE. For example, students on one team recently engaged in a cross-curricular project in response to the question, "How might we solve for pandemic-related food shortages?" On another team, students created a board game, a task requiring them to synthesize their learning in math about return on investment; their learning in ELA about persuasion, ethos, pathos, and logos; and their learning in CTE about designing, marketing and sales.

Flexible space and scheduling

One of the six teams facilitates instruction in a flexible space that allows them to collapse walls between three classrooms. This team regularly opens the space to teach up to 90 students together. For example, while students wrote research papers for a recent cross-curricular unit, educators lengthened class periods, opened the modular walls between rooms, and circulated throughout the full learning space, providing students with access to much of the core educator team for a prolonged time period.

Teams who don't have access to learning spaces with modular walls still find creative ways to flex their spaces and their schedules, often utilizing the school's two auditoriums, two gymnasiums, amphitheater, football field or track for large-group time.

Agricultural Program

Westwood High School's campus is 64 acres in size and includes a working farm with vegetable gardens and livestock (e.g., chicken, pigs, cows, emus). Two of the ninth grade academies' six teams partner closely with the high school's agricultural program and offer students in-depth experience working on the farm as part of their Career Technical Education. Two days each week, these ninth grade students learn how to grow vegetables (many of which are donated to community organizations), care for the school's 100 laying hens and apply sustainable practices. Students also learn about what a career in agribusiness management, agricultural resources or engineering might entail. Although not all students from the agricultural program-partnered teams go on to pursue CTE pathways within the agricultural program in Grades 10–12, they all benefit from the opportunity to apply their understanding of complex biology content in authentic ways.

Specializations and advancement pathways

Each of Westwood's Academy Teams is led by a lead teacher who is an experienced educational leader on the campus. While each of the six teams has personalized this role for the educator assuming leadership, these teacher-leaders may facilitate team meetings, support other team members' instructional planning, provide coaching and mentorship, and/or serve as the bridge between the team and the school administration.